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### Redback Graphix - Gregor Cullen interviewed by Mike Donaldson

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Gregor Cullen

*Redback Graphix*

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#### Recommended Citation

Donaldson, Mike and Cullen, Gregor, Redback Graphix - Gregor Cullen interviewed by Mike Donaldson  
1981.

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## **Redback Graphix**

*Australian Left Review*, No.77, 1981, pp.22-24.

Gregor Cullen interviewed by Mike Donaldson

*Gregor, I wonder if you could tell me about your work in Wollongong, and what's been going on there?*

Last year, several people involved in political and cultural work, who were working as individuals, or with other groups in Sydney, came down to the Illawarra and started to produce cultural work with unemployed people, trade unionists and community activists.

Work developed around particular media fields: Bread and Circus in theatre; Steel City Pictures in film; Redback Graphix in visual arts. Redback Graphix, the project which I'm involved in, has been working with and assisting unions to visually communicate their policies, and the issues involved in particular disputes, to the broader public. The unions are beginning to see that through using strong visual presentation they are better able to take important issues to the public.

In August 1980, the three groups came together in a forum on "Work and Art" at the Wollongong Workers Club (organized by the Sydney Artworkers Union and Redback Graphix in Wollongong). This helped to bring us into contact with a number of people on the South Coast who had been involved in the labor movement over a long period. We realised there had been a history of political cultural work in the district long before we arrived, that this sort of work had been produced around issues like the struggle for a shorter working week in the mines. The best feature of the forum was that it brought together activists who had done this sort of work in the past, and a new group of cultural workers. The work we are now doing in Wollongong had a history that we are now beginning to uncover.

The forum drove home to me, in a very powerful way, that culture wasn't only something that mystified day-to-day realities, but that there is a whole history of working class creative cultural activity.

On the South Coast, no specifically "Artistic Workers" groups – workers' photography, music, song-writing, etc. – have been established until recently, but workers' creativity in the district had been expressed in the past in the particular struggles about their working lives.

Fred Moore (a retired miner on the Coast) was using dramatic and effective forms of street theatre to put the miners' case long before the term "street theatre" was thought of. This history enables us to be seen, not just as "artists" working alone, isolated from trade unionists and older rank-and-file militants.

*More practically, what sort of projects have you been involved in?*

Since the bonus campaign, we have been involved in the production of publications – pamphlets, and a multilingual rank-and-file newspaper. The best example of our recent work is the publication on the demise of the general cargo facilities at Port Kembla Harbour. We were approached by the

Waterside Workers Federation to collaborate with a local research group, the Wollongong Workers Research Centre (WRC).

The Wollongong WRC produced a research document about what was happening with the bypassing of Port Kembla, and how that affected the jobs and futures of waterside workers. The issue also involved a consideration of the role of multinational and national capital. Our task was to take the Wollongong WRC report and, using our skills as visual artists, to produce a publication visually acceptable to a much broader range of people, creating community awareness about what is happening on the docks.

Through working on this publication, we wanted the labor movement to see that the visual arts can have a much more active role: that art is not just a cultural commodity. We want to demonstrate that our work can be an important means of developing class consciousness.

*From this account of your activities, there seems to be a difference in approach between what you're doing and what the Newcastle Workers' Cultural Action Group is attempting to do. They seem to be saying "We're workers, working in the culture industry and we want to make the products we create with our labor more accessible to working people." Now, what you're doing is rather different. You're not concerned with the question of the accessibility of "art", but with creating political art, propaganda. Newcastle seems to be more concerned with the question of who consumes art, you with the question of why it is produced in the first place.*

Let me start by saying this: for us, the needs of an industrial community like the South Coast cannot be separated from on-the-job struggles for wages and safer working conditions; these struggles raise crucial issues that affect the whole community.

For example, the WWF publication *On the Bypassing of Port Kembla Harbor* in examining on-the-job issues raised broader questions concerning the regional economy, the environmental impact and long-term employment prospects in the district. Our own work and involvement is part of this strategy to develop a broader analysis of industrial issues.

But the point the Newcastle activists raise concerning accessibility is important as an alternative to commercial galleries and established theatres. Theatre like Bread and Circus Theatre's production of *Down the Mine and Up the Spout Show* is in the form of popular restaurant theatre, but it raises political issues: the 35-hour week and automation in the mines. Bread and Circus have successfully adapted the theatre restaurant form and turned it into a propaganda tool, bringing to life old struggles that are relevant now.

The Newcastle cultural workers have also raised the important issue of the artist-as-worker. Cultural workers face many of the same issues that confront workers in other industries: unemployment, underemployment, lack of information on health and safety, corporate control of marketing and distribution, the problems faced with the new technology, and copyright laws.

Still central for Newcastle is the concern to give more access to culture as a form of recreation.

*As for the real world of art marketing and economics, would you say that there is very little chance of a visual artist today even managing to get by, let alone obtain a reasonable income?*

Since the mid-1970s there has taken place a radicalisation of artworkers who have been concerned with raising questions, some of which are about working conditions and wages. As a result of the present economic crisis in art, marketing has shifted to more corporate sponsorship which supports

a conservative, uncritical cultural product. The number of artists who are willing to produce cultural products which reflect corporate ideology is limited.

Cultural workers, through organisations such as the Artworkers Union, and community arts projects, are now demanding a more democratic distribution of state funding for cultural production. If this demand is successful, it will have a radicalising effect on the cultural industry, giving more opportunities for artists outside the “established elite” to find a viable political alternative to the present control of the commercial art market.

*So you would see the main difference between your work and the work of bourgeois artists as being the content of your work? Do you see any difference in the style of your work as well? You are doing different things, for different reasons, for different people. Are you doing them in a different manner?*

Style is determined, to some extent, by the resources. Ours are very limited at the moment and this restricts the sort of work we could do. I'm very interested in the work produced in Germany during the late 1920s and '30s, associated with John Heartfield and his use of political photo-montage. Our work as visual artists also involves crucial questions of multiculturalism. Wollongong has many migrant groups and this is a crucial element in developing visual representations that address a multicultural community.

In a regional industrial community such as the Illawarra, the labor movement has historically provided structures for critical cultural activities to be supported in. It's important not to get fixated with having to develop quasi-alternatives. May Day is a great opportunity to produce banners, large painter-type images around important issues which can be presented in their historical context.

Is there any important significance in the reasons for your returning to Wollongong?

Michael (Callaghan) and I grew up in Wollongong and went to Sydney to study sculpture and painting. Returning to the 'gong to work as political-cultural activists was a major step in the development of our own political experience and understanding. Cultural skills tend to be centralised in major capitals due to many factors, some of these being cultural policy and capital. With the rebuilding of the workers' movement, we saw that our skills could be best developed alongside the labor movement in this region.

Postscript

Early in 1981, grants were received from both the NSW state government and federal government cultural funds to further develop the role of the visual arts in the industrial community. Both Michael Callaghan and Gregor Cullen are employed under a 12-month artist-in-residence project to establish a silk screen printing workshop from which the Redback Graphix project will be based.

Redback Graphix will continue to develop a policy of decentralisation of cultural skills and encourage the visual arts to be seen as an important strategic resource for the labor movement, and not simply as a passive and recreational activity.